

RESEARCH AND PRACTICE WITH ELDERLY VOLUNTEERS:
ADDRESSING ISSUES OF ROLE STRAIN, SATISFACTION, AND RETENTION

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

As older people are living longer and retiring earlier, there is a greater period of leisure time in later life. Approximately 23% of people ages 65 and older choose to spend some of this time volunteering. Of these six million people, a substantial number discontinue volunteering within one year.

In one major metropolitan city, 10,000 older adults volunteer under the auspices of a volunteer program for retired seniors. The annual drop out rate is 25%, indicating that 2,500 of these older volunteers leave their jobs each year. This is costly to the volunteer organization in terms of money and manpower for recruitment, training, and replacement. Volunteer turnover also means disruption in provision of services to placement agencies and clients.

The goals of this research are to:

- 1) Determine what contributes to differentials in rates of retention for elderly volunteers;
- 2) contribute to the theoretical knowledge base of social work practice;
- 3) provide information that may be used in social work practice with volunteer organizations, placement agencies, and senior volunteers.

If social work intervention with the volunteer organization and placement agencies helps to increase the length of time older volunteers stay on the job, the volunteer organization will have less need to spend money and human resources for recruitment, training, and replacement of volunteers; placement agencies and clients will have more continuity of service; and older volunteers will experience a longer period of participation in their volunteer career.

The research questions which follow serve as lines of inquiry to this search.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- I. What are the sociodemographic characteristics of the older volunteers of study?
- II. What is the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and
 - .role strain?
 - .volunteer satisfaction?
 - .retention?
- III. What is the relationship between characteristics of the volunteer role and
 - .role strain?
 - .volunteer satisfaction?
 - .retention?
- IV. What is the relationship between role strain and
 - .volunteer satisfaction?
 - .retention?
- V. How can the above findings be used to enhance "goodness-of-fit" between senior volunteer and volunteer experience?

METHODOLOGY

This research has been conducted through a survey design with a descriptive and explanatory focus. Its descriptive component profiles the subjects according to sociodemographic characteristics, identifies their reasons for continuing or discontinuing volunteer service, and indicates levels of satisfaction and retention. Its explanatory focus shows correlations between sociodemographic and role variables and the outcome variables of role strain, volunteer satisfaction and retention.

The population of interest is older adults in one senior volunteer program who began volunteering in the fall of 1985. The method of data collection is the questionnaire, developed by this researcher and pretested for reliability and validity. At the pretest phase, reliability for items measuring volunteer satisfaction was confirmed by a Cronbach's Alpha of .95. Face validity was established per the assessment of six experts in gerontology and senior voluntarism. Content validity was upheld for satisfaction, retention, and socioeconomic status by comparing questionnaire items with descriptive information from the literature. Criterion validity was determined for retention, age, marital status, and gender through reference to completed senior volunteer applications.

The questionnaire was group-administered to current volunteers at their placement sites and mailed to former volunteers at their homes. There were two versions of the questionnaire--one for current volunteers and one for former volunteers. The director of the volunteer organization wrote a note of endorsement which accompanied each questionnaire. Followup phone calls were made to contact people at placement sites and to individual volunteers. The overall response rate was 60%.

RESULTS

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OLDER VOLUNTEERS

The majority of volunteers were women in their sixties who had a high school education and received an annual income of \$5,000 to \$10,000. Most of these women were widowed and had lived in their communities for more than thirty years, volunteered within one mile from their homes, and had provided community service for more than ten years. In addition, most of the volunteers were white and nearly one-fourth were Jewish.

Current volunteers were more likely to be unemployed and in stable health, in addition to the above characteristics. Former volunteers were most typically in their seventies, with less than \$5,000 annual income and less than five years of community service.

The main reason volunteers continued to serve was because they felt useful. The main reason volunteers dropped out was because they did not feel useful; health-related reasons were the second-most cited reason for discontinuing volunteer service.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND
ROLE STRAIN, VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION, AND RETENTION

Sociodemographic characteristics that are significantly related to role strain, or difficulty with volunteer work, are level of income*, employment status**, and proximity to volunteer assignment**. Volunteers with lower levels of income, those who are not employed, and those who live within one mile of the volunteer assignment are likely to indicate less difficulty with volunteer work.

Sociodemographic characteristics that are significantly related to volunteer satisfaction are life satisfaction*, pattern of community service*, and proximity to volunteer assignment*. Volunteers who are higher in life satisfaction and have provided more than ten years of community service are likely to indicate higher levels of volunteer satisfaction. Volunteers who live further away from assignment are more likely to express higher levels of satisfaction. This surprising finding leads to speculation as to whether the process of getting to and from the assignment, which could include opportunity for social interaction, contributes to satisfaction with the work.

Sociodemographic characteristics that are significantly related to retention are employment status* and involvement in community service**. Volunteers who are not employed and have a history of community service are most likely to stay on the job.

1 Asterisks denote the following levels of significance:

*p< .05
**p< .01
***p<.001.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VOLUNTEER ROLE AND ROLE STRAIN, VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION, AND RETENTION

Data analysis indicates that role recognition from peers and agency staff is significantly related to role strain, volunteer satisfaction, and retention. Perceiving high levels of recognition is associated with less strain, more satisfaction, and greater retention.

Characteristics of the volunteer role that are significantly related to role strain are role recognition*** and role mobility**. In addition to feeling recognized for one's work, the opportunity to have one's responsibilities increased or decreased appears to relate to less strain with the work.

Qualities of the volunteer role that are significantly related to satisfaction are role congruence**, role-set interaction**, transportation assistance**, and role continuity**--in addition to role recognition***. Volunteers whose jobs meet their expectations, who have contact with others, who are provided with transportation assistance or reimbursement, who feel as respected as they did in other roles--and who feel recognized for their work--are likely to express higher levels of satisfaction.

The role characteristics that are significantly related to retention are role recognition***, role-set interaction***, role congruence***, and role competence*. In addition to feeling recognized, having interaction with others on the job, having expectations met (congruence between expectations and experience), and feeling that one has the knowledge and skill for the job (competence) all contribute to staying on the job. Thus, role-set interaction and role congruence are significantly associated with both satisfaction and retention, but not with role strain.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROLE STRAIN AND VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION AND RETENTION

Role strain is associated with volunteer satisfaction and with retention of elderly volunteers. However, the association with satisfaction is at $p=.063$, while the association between role strain and retention is $p<.05$. Thus, although strain relates to satisfaction, the relationship between strain and retention is stronger.

APPLICATION OF FINDINGS TO ENHANCE "GOODNESS-OF-FIT" BETWEEN SENIOR VOLUNTEER AND VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

"Goodness-of-fit" between senior volunteer and volunteer experience is expressed in terms of low role strain, high satisfaction, and high retention. The combinations of personal and role characteristics that best explain variance in role strain is PROXIMITY TO ASSIGNMENT and ROLE RECOGNITION. The combination that best explains variance in volunteer satisfaction is PROXIMITY, RECOGNITION, and ROLE CONTINUITY. The combination that best explains retention is ROLE-SET INTERACTION and PATTERN OF COMMUNITY SERVICE. Thus, the characteristics that explain strain and satisfaction are similar, while retention is explained by different variables. However, since strain and satisfaction are associated with retention, we place importance upon combinations of characteristics that are associated with them as well. For "goodness-of-fit," the "critical characteristics" are:

- *PATTERN OF COMMUNITY SERVICE;
- *PROXIMITY TO ASSIGNMENT;
- *ROLESET INTERACTION;
- *ROLE CONTINUITY;
- *RECOGNITION.

These findings are interpreted to mean that elderly volunteers who:

- *have a lifestyle of involvement in community service,
- *live within close proximity of their volunteer assignment- or receive transportation assistance,
- *have contact with others on the job,
- *perceive respect similar to that which was received in former roles, and
- *receive recognition from people at work and the volunteer organization

are most likely to experience less strain and more satisfaction and retention in the senior volunteer career.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Research findings related to combinations of personal and role characteristics illumine practical means of addressing problematic retention of senior volunteers while enhancing satisfaction and reducing strain. Social work intervention with the volunteer organization, placement agencies, and senior volunteers can apply knowledge that relates personal and role characteristics with retention.

The senior volunteer organization may plan recruitment strategies to target volunteers who have a life pattern of involvement in community service. Volunteers who have more than ten cumulative years of service experience, including volunteer work, are more likely to continue volunteering throughout older adulthood.

Efforts to place volunteers in jobs that are within close proximity of their home or workplace appear to be effective. When volunteers are needed for a particular site, older adults from nearby community organizations may be prime candidates. This taps community-involved people who are likely to live within close proximity to the volunteer site. If proximity is not viable, then provision of transportation can serve as an instrumental reward and afford an opportunity for social interaction.

The organization can further benefit by actively recognizing the value of senior volunteers and staff of placement agencies. The older volunteers, as well as the agency staff of all ages, need to feel useful; recognition can reinforce one's sense of usefulness to the agency and the organization. The volunteer organization is advised to convey appreciation to staff of placement agencies, and encourage agency staff to demonstrate their appreciation for their senior volunteers. This can be communicated through formal recognition ceremonies, certificates and letters of appreciation, and word-of-mouth. Recognition from both volunteer organization and the people the volunteer works with is desired by senior volunteers, and one way to achieve such shows of recognition is to give it.

Placement agencies which "employ" older volunteers are more likely to enjoy less turnover when volunteers can interact with agency staff and other volunteers. Job assignments that afford interaction with several people at different levels of the organization are recommended. Attention from supervisory and administrative staff provides both recognition and interaction with staff from different organizational levels.

Social workers have a role in training the staff of volunteer organizations and placement agencies to apply these practices in volunteer recruitment and supervision. Staff development workshops and recognition ceremonies for community agency staff provides an example of the recognition that is being condoned. Social workers employed by the volunteer organization may also have an instrumental role in interviewing and placing senior volunteers. Finding out about the prospective volunteer's experiences and expectations can facilitate placement in a setting that affords continuity with previous roles that were meaningful. In addition, social workers may provide the direct supervision of senior volunteers at placement agencies and thus have on-site opportunity to facilitate staff-volunteer interaction and recognition.

Social work educators need to address demographic changes that result in a growing number of well-elderly who have time, ability, and a need for purpose in later life. Efforts to meet the needs of volunteer organizations and older volunteers can be likened to meeting the needs of students in field placements through focus on sociodemographic and ecological variables that affect "goodness-of-fit" between person and place.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Contributions from role theory, continuity theory, and the ecological perspective have served as the bases for variables of study. It appears that role theory aids understanding of social work practice with elderly volunteers by serving as a "bridge" between older volunteer and the volunteer experience. From role theory, we have identified variables of study to test out in regard to their relationship to volunteer satisfaction and retention. Volunteers who indicated role strain were twice as likely to discontinue service than were volunteers indicating no strain. Role recognition was found to significantly affect role strain as well as volunteer satisfaction and retention. Other role characteristics, such as role-set interaction, role congruence, and role competence significantly affected volunteer retention. Role characteristics were included in the combinations of characteristics that best explained variance in role strain, volunteer satisfaction, and retention.

Continuity theory, which attests to the continuation of behavior patterns throughout adulthood, is upheld through the positive relationship between previous involvement in community service and retention as an older volunteer. In addition, volunteers' responses to reason for continuing or discontinuing volunteer service were most often feeling useful or not feeling useful, respectively. It appears that the importance of feeling useful in younger adulthood continues to be important in older adulthood.

The ecological perspective of attending to the interface of personal and environmental characteristics is exemplified through the significance of sociodemographic characteristics of the volunteers and environmental qualities of the volunteer organization and placement agencies. For this sample of senior volunteers, certain environmental qualities emerge as essential requirements for retention in the volunteer role; these relate to proximity to assignment, opportunity for interpersonal contact, and recognition from people the volunteer works for and with.

The social work profession is challenged to address the new knowledge related to elderly volunteers and organizational practices which appear to enhance retention. It is possible that further study of personal characteristics and role qualities may enable the social work profession to work toward "goodness-of-fit" with other populations-at-risk.

SUMMARY

Older adults are living longer and have a greater period of leisure time in later life. Senior volunteerism is an option for those who wish to provide service to others. Of older adults who choose to volunteer, a substantial number discontinue service within one year; this results in costly turnover to the volunteer organization, inconsistency in service to placement agencies and clients, and disruption of the senior volunteer career.

This researcher studied a sample of older volunteers from one senior volunteer organization in New York City. Questionnaires were completed by 151 volunteers from ages 60 through 93; this was a 60% response rate. After one and one half years from the onset of volunteering, 75% of the sample continued to provide service and 25% had discontinued. A primary study purpose was to understand what contributes to the differential in rates of retention.

Personal characteristics of the volunteers and qualities of the volunteer role were addressed. Role theory served as a theoretical bridge between person and environment, offering concepts that could be operationalized and evaluated for association with volunteer retention. Continuity theory and the ecological perspective also served as bases for development of study variables.

Findings indicate combinations of personal and role characteristics that together explain the variance in role strain, volunteer satisfaction, and retention. Role strain, or difficulty with volunteer work, is best explained by proximity to assignment and amount of recognition perceived. Volunteers who live closer to the volunteer site and perceive high levels of recognition from the volunteer organization and the people they work with are less likely to indicate role strain. Together these variables explain 19% of the variance in role strain.

Volunteer satisfaction is best explained by proximity, recognition, and role continuity in terms of amount of respect received on the job. When the older volunteer considers the respect received for volunteer work to be similar to that received for former roles, satisfaction is enhanced. Together these variables explain 28% of the variance in volunteer satisfaction.

Retention is best explained by pattern of community service and role-set interaction. Volunteers who have provided more than ten cumulative years of community service during adulthood and who have contact with several people at different levels of the placement organization are more likely to stay on the job. These two variables explain 16% of the variance in retention.

Senior volunteers who have a history of community service, live within close proximity of their volunteer placement, have the opportunity to interact with others on the job, feel a level of respect similar to that received in former roles, and feel highly recognized by the people they work with and for are the volunteers in this sample who are most likely to indicate less strain and more satisfaction and retention. Recruitment, placement, and supervision of senior volunteers, as well as training of agency staff who work with them, can address these needs to work toward "goodness-of-fit" between senior volunteer and the volunteer experience.

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